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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Nassmacher, K.-H. (1980). Local traditions of voting behaviour and party structure in Lower Saxony (Oldenburg/Ostfriesland). *Historical Social Research*, 5(2), 27-33. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.5.1980.2.27-33>

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LOCAL TRADITIONS OF VOTING BEHAVIOUR AND PARTY
STRUCTURE IN LOWER SAXONY (OLDENBURG/OSTFRIESLAND)

Karl-Heinz Nassmacher *

Modern democracy and industrial economy are embedded in a complex set of social and political change often named the process of modernization. In general this process has been analyzed frequently. Important political aspects have been treated by Lipset, Rokkan, Weiner, La Palombara and others (1). Years ago Abendroth has suggested a local and regional approach to the impact of social structure on political behaviour (2). His suggestion initiated some of studies compiling all the data available for several smaller urban and rural areas (3). A different line of research in the same field was started by Heberle's pioneer work on Schleswig-Holstein and Sahner's replication of this study (4). Neither approach has been tried in studies of Lower Saxony or its northwestern part (Oldenburg/Ostfriesland) (5). This area (i.e. the former administrative districts of Aurich and Oldenburg, including eight counties and four county boroughs or cities) is subject of a regionally orientated research program on "Social and political change in northwestern Lower Saxony" (SOPOWA) at the University of Oldenburg. The program was started in 1976 and is supported by a grant from research funds of the land of Lower Saxony. Research work so far has concentrated mainly on the territory of the former duchy/republic of Oldenburg. Four historians and four political scientists cooperate in a program that includes four special studies on different aspects of the general topic. One of them, the analysis of local traditions of voting behaviour and party structure directed by Karl-Heinz Nassmacher and Wolfgang Rudzio, is subject of this report.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A first glance at electoral statistics of the Oldenburg area shows significant differences in the local distribution of the vote: The industrialized areas of Delmenhorst, Nordenham and Wilhelmshaven are - not at all surprisingly - dominated by the SPD, the counties of Cloppenburg and Vechta (Oldenburgisches Münsterland) belong to the strongholds of the CDU. Since these counties may be described as rural and catholic this is not surprising either. The interesting part of the region enclaves communities that combine the features rural and protestant. Whereas the industrial and catholic areas respectively display a tradition of continuity in voting behaviour, the rural and protestant counties (especially Ammerland, Friesland and Wesermarsch) experienced considerable electoral change. This

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change not being induced by social mobility or economic development in general our study tries to find out why the majority of voters in this area aligned with liberal candidates during the Empire and the first part of the Weimar Republic, with the NSDAP towards the end of the Weimar Republic and with the FDP from 1947 up to the sixties. (Sahner found that people in a similar social setting in Schleswig-Holstein vote for the CDU straight from the beginning of that party.)

Being limited to a certain region and information derived from election results and census data our research will follow the lines of political ecology trying to keep in mind all of its shortcomings but raising questions that survey researchers have not yet tackled sufficiently, especially the problems of contextual factors in voting behaviour, the relevance of specific sub-national (regional and local) cleavage structures and local political personnel. The conceptual frame of our research, outlined more specifically in a recent publication (6), has been supplied by a critical evaluation of different nationwide studies on voting behaviour, especially by Lepsius, Kaltefleiter and the Infas institute.

Lepsius has pointed out that in Germany the introduction of mass suffrage led to the formation of four socio-political subcultures ("milieus") reflecting the cleavage structure of German society at the time of political mobilization, the end of the nineteenth century: the liberal, the conservative, the catholic and the socialist milieus (7), each of them representing a separate network of social communication and interaction. Set aside the growing electoral support of the socialist milieu (due to growing numbers of the industrial proletariat) during the last decades of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th century these four subcultures (even if represented by more than a single political party) stayed considerably stable from the seventies of the 19th to the twenties of the 20th century. Social change during the twenties (inflation and depression) set the stage for the end of the subcultures (and the democratic republic of Weimar). The subcultural dimension of electoral history seems to have no importance whatsoever for the new start of democracy after 1945.

From the tree analysis of social structure (especially personal ties with the catholic faith or the trade union movement, working or middle class background) the research staff of Infas has derived the hypothesis that German voters belong to four distinct blocs of political tradition (or the absence thereof) that determine their voting behaviour: the traditional left, the traditionally catholic segment, the traditionally conservative sector or a group with multiple links (8). Since the catholics and the conservatives combine in the CDU/CSU, this party (compared to the SPD) can rely on a built-in majority of the popular vote. According to this analysis the SPD can become the majority party only if it wins overwhelming support among the floating vote of the "group with multiple links". Although rather successful in predicting the built-in bias of electoral support Infas does not bother to explain why the traditionally conservatives vote for the CDU (in certain areas they did not do so before the sixties) and what initiated their alignment with the major bourgeois party (certain policies, conservative ideology or a process of mutual rapprochement?).

Kaltefleiter tries to explain this by referring to personal, insti-

tutional and economic factors: the political perception of the lasting economic boom, the idea of chancellor's elections and personal support for Dr. Adenauer and Prof. Erhard induced a concentration of the German party system that was partially shaken during the sixties (by the NPD) but still prevails (9). This concept of political concentration perceives floating votes either between the two major parties or between a major party and its minor ally or a newcoming group of political protest respectively. His model of German voting behaviour is derived from political and economic cycles as well as the major findings of survey research on party preference, issue competence and the candidates running for chancellor. This leaves only negligible interest to the fall of minor parties during the fifties and sixties or local deviations from the general pattern.

Our study does concentrate on these omissions. We want to explain regional differences between voters of the same political party, especially local ties between national parties and individual voters. By studying the local traditions of party structure we try to establish a more general pattern of continuity and change in German electoral politics.

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA PROCESSING

Studies in electoral history find access to their data much easier than other quantitative studies of social history. Nevertheless they run into special difficulties that have to be mentioned:

- Election results are neither secret nor public - the extent of publication depends on conventional practices of statistical offices and regional mass media; availability of data depends on time and region concerned.
- In Germany election results are recorded for areas neither identical over time nor changing for every election - the regional basis of the data does not depend on redistribution of seats but on different stages of local government reform, especially the incorporation of smaller communities into larger ones.

Electoral statistics and census data are easily available and compatible on the county level of public administration. It is mainly for this reason, that studies in electoral history concentrate on either a few counties (preferable even one) or on national data broken down by counties only. Just for contrast both studies in electoral history of the SOPOWA program (10) started collecting all the election results and census data available for the communities belonging to the entire region that is subject of our study. There are 125 urban and rural districts (i.e. separate units of local government) in the area now; there used to be 394 cities, boroughs, towns and villages from the forties till the end of the sixties. We gathered the electoral results of these 394 communities for the national parliament (Bundestag) from 1949 to 1976, for the state legislature of Lower Saxony (Landtag) from 1947 to 1978, for the county councils (Kreistage) from 1952 to 1977 and for the local councils (Gemeinderäte) from 1952 to 1976.

The data were transformed to per cent figures based on the number of registered voters (Wahlberechtigte). Due to the fact that registration in Germany does legally include all enfranchised adults living in a certain community without any activity on their side, the voting register enlists the maximum number of votes all parties can possibly mobilize at the polls. (Abstentions among the electoral following of one party will influence the general turnout but not the mobilization rate of the other parties). The political data are matched by selected demographic information (e.g. catholic, agrarian, industrial or working class segments of the local population) from census data of 1946, 1950, 1961 and 1970 for all the 394 communities concerned.

Data processing techniques (mainly based on SPSS procedures) include the computation of frequencies and averages, linear regressions and correlation coefficients for each set of data and combinations of both kinds. Factor analysis and cluster analysis have been applied either to election results or to census data. While data collection and data processing are still under way initial results have been subject of two major research papers, one of them concerning the whole region from 1947 to 1970 (11), the other concentrating on the Oldenburg area (i.e. the former duchy/republic of Oldenburg) but expanding the time perspective from 1898 to 1970 (12). Some (still unpublished) local case studies each treating a single predominantly liberal, catholic or socialist community respectively (Wiefelstede, Damme, Lemwerder) have also been completed (13).

MAJOR FINDINGS

Although Lepsius has argued that due to an erosion of their social bases the socio-political subcultures (milieus) vanished politically during the late twenties and the early thirties, our data prove that the traditional milieus survived the social and political turmoil of the Depression and the War. The catholic and the socialist pillars of German political culture remained completely unshaken, the liberal and the conservative milieus temporarily hustled to a different (and rather strange) form of political representation (i.e. the NSDAP) but re-emerged (although markedly reduced in voting strength) after the war. In those regions of Western Germany where they had a local basis during the Empire and the Weimar Republic all milieus re-established their traditional pattern of political organization in their former strongholds. The German political culture of the seventies however produces remnants of the traditional milieus only when approached by some sort of political archaeology.

Since the persistence of socio-political milieus is produced by close interrelations between political traditions and social structure on the local level strongholds of three important subcultures (liberal, catholic, socialist) can be identified in regionally different parts of the Oldenburg area. Identification is possible either by indicators of political behaviour (i.e. election results) or by dominant features of social structure (i.e. census data). Either selection of characteristics gives a quantitative demonstration of the locally dominant milieu but does not explain why a certain subculture became so important for a specific community.

Establishment and persistence of socio-political subcultures require not only a sufficient quantity of people with common belief systems, personal experiences and living conditions but also certain patterns of social communication and integration, e.g. persist nt cleavages separating the specific milieu from other parts of (local, regional or national) society or the existence of established subcultural organizations such as the catholic church or the trade unions. Socio-political milieus that can be identified in certain parts of the region (e.g. in communities, parishes or villages) are systems of social communication transmitting fundamental orientations towards polity, politics and policies. As a system of political orientation and communication the subculture remains relatively stable until the effects of milieu-shaping factors are undermined by fundamental changes within the social structure or critical events on the political scene.

Difficulties in analyzing the political relevance of predominantly socio-political or even socio-moral milieus arise from the observation that in the course of history the same subculture has been represented by different parties although these stayed pretty close in their ideologies, e.g. the national liberals and the progressives during the Empire or the (catholic) center party and its Bavarian replica, the Bavarian people's party, during the Weimar Republic. A similar complication arises when different subcultures (in different regions of the nation) are represented by the same political party. Parties of this kind have been the "catch-all-parties" (Volksparteien) NSDAP and CDU/CSU, either one elaborating certain cleavage lines while bridging others at the same time.

Realignments between socio-political subcultures and their specific parties are triggered off by social change and political events. The fall of a party that has traditionally represented a certain milieu is not at all by collapse once and for good. There is rather a crippling process instead with a remarkable time-lag on the local level of government. The fading party presents candidates for the local council even after loosing representation in the national parliament and the state legislature. During this process of fading away the party in question is supported by a larger proportion of the electorate in the same community for local council than for national or state assemblies. The political affiliation of local representatives is an important factor influencing the duration of the crippling process: If they stay with the traditional party, its fading away is retarded; if all local representatives realign with another party, the old one vanishes from the local political scene in collapse.

Local representatives of sub-communal localities link up parochial social structure and socio-political milieu (14). This is especially true if electoral procedures by means of preferential voting offer to the individual voter a chance for personal selection from party lists thus encouraging the voter to pick candidates from his own neighbourhood. Even in towns of 20.000 people in the rural parts of the country voting is most heavily along sub-local lines, only occasionally in accordance with the national cleavages. Neighbourhood representation is as well a channel of political recruitment as a means of voters' mobilization. Local standing of a political party and its ability to find candidates akin to the local milieu depend heavily on each other.

SUMMARY

Ever since German electoral politics attracted enough money and manpower the survey researchers have taken over almost the entire fields. Social scientists applying political ecology or other techniques of historical electoral research, e.g. von Schuckmann, Sahner and Troitzsch, have been a scattered minority. The data available for statistical analysis are election results and census data collected by the various statistical offices. Broken down to administrative units at the local level (urban and rural districts) the data demonstrate significant differences of social structure and political behaviour. Processing of machine readable data allows for larger regions, more sophisticated techniques and reveals contextual factors most commonly disregarded by survey researchers: sub-national cleavages, regional political traditions and local political personnel. Subject of the study presented here is voting behaviour in the northwestern part of Lower Saxony, the former administrative districts of Aurich and Oldenburg, from the 19th century up to the present.

FOOTNOTES

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- 3 e.g. Haseloff, Wolfgang: Die politischen Parteien und die Wahlen in Waldeck 1867-1953, Marburg 1955; Knauss, Erwin: Entwicklungen und Strukturen des Kreises Gießen, Gießen 1961; Kurt, Alfred: Wahlen und Wähler im Wahlkreis Offenbach, Offenbach 1966; Stoffregen, Albert: Die Geschichte der politischen Parteien und Wahlen im Gebiet des Kreises Gandersheim und der Stadt Salzgitter von 1867 bis 1963, Marburg 1965; Frenz, Wilhelm: Die politische Entwicklung in Kassel 1945-1969, Meisenheim 1974; Graf, Hans: Die Entwicklung der Wahlen und der politischen Parteien in Groß-Dortmund, Frankfurt und Hannover 1958; Lambers, Hanno: Die politische Entwicklung von 1917 bis 1924 in Hagen und Haspe, Hagen 1963; Neusüss-Hunkel, Ermenhild: Parteien und Wahlen in Marburg nach 1945, Meisenheim 1973.
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- 7 Lepsius, M. Rainer: Parteiensystem und Sozialstruktur, in: Abel, Wilhelm et al. (eds.): Wirtschaft, Geschichte und Wirtschaftsge-
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- 8 Liepelt, Klaus / Mitscherlich, Alexander: Thesen zur Wählerfluk-
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- 9 Kaltefleiter, Werner: Wirtschaft und Politik in Deutschland,
2nd ed., Köln and Opladen 1968; Kaltefleiter, Werner: Vorspiel
zum Wechsel, Berlin 1977.
- 10 The other study on "Social structure and political behaviour since
1900" is directed by Wolfgang Günther.
- 11 Wokittel, Astrid: Wahlverhalten in Oldenburg und Ostfriesland -
eine EDV-gestützte Analyse von Daten der amtlichen Statistik,
1978.
- 12 cf. note 6.
- 13 Würdemann, Karl-Heinz: Kommunalpolitische Entwicklung und Wahl-
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- 14 For details cf. Nassmacher, Karl-Heinz / Rudzio, Wolfgang: Das
lokale Parteiensystem auf dem Lande, in: Wehling, Hans-Georg
(ed.): Dorfpolitik, Opladen 1978, p. 127 ff.